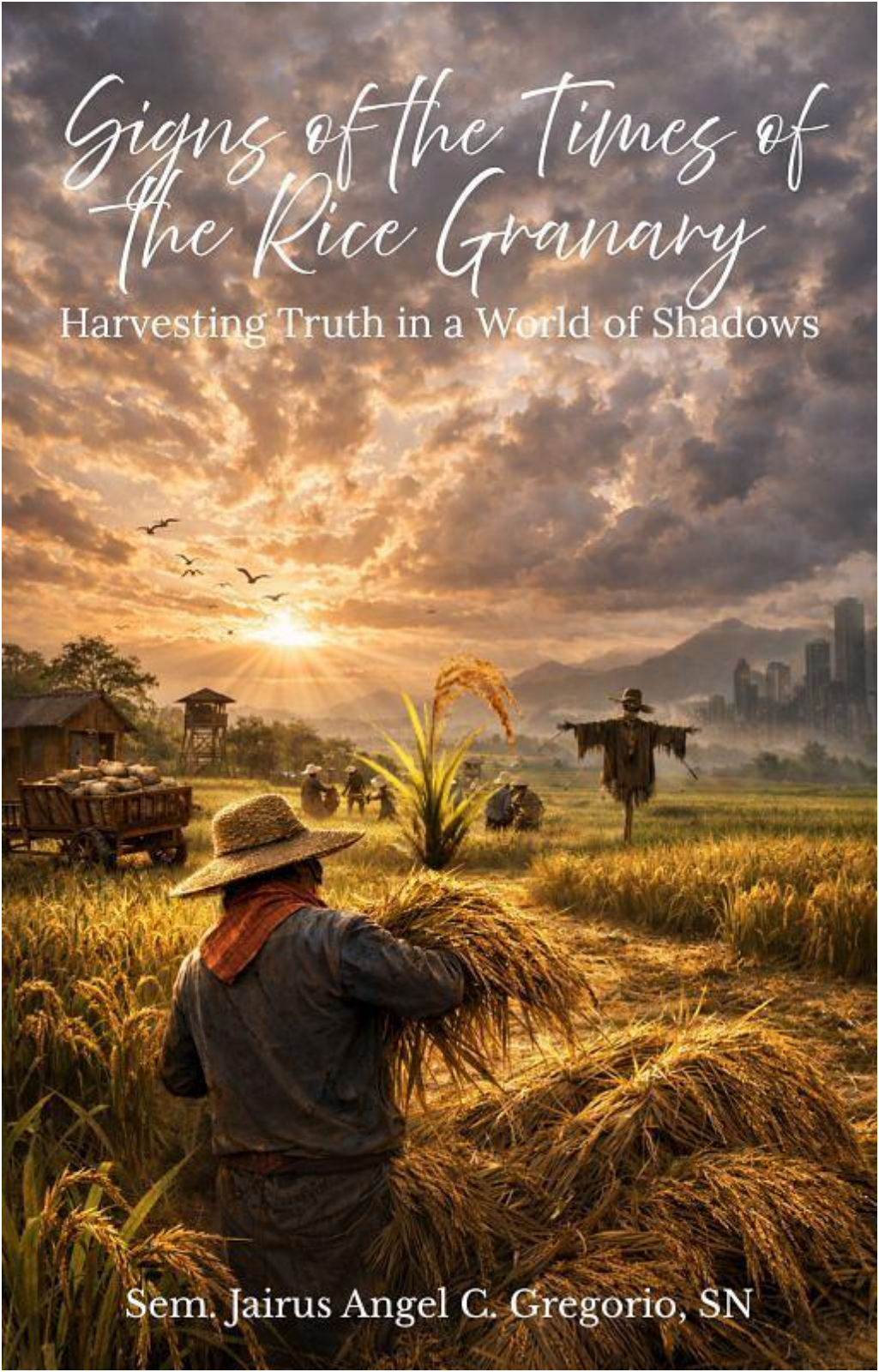
Signs of the Times of the Rice Granary

Harvesting Truth in a World of Shadows



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Contents

Preface

1. Ghost Projects and Broken Stewardship

2. Threads of Hope

3. Epiphany and the Politics of Unity

4. The Epal Gospel

5. Where Mushrooms and Miracles Meet

Dedication

Preface

This collection, ***Signs of the Times of the Rice Granary***, represents a disciplined journey of reflection, discernment, and dialogue between the world we inhabit and the Word of God. Across these pages, you will encounter five weeks of focused engagement, each entry arising from a single local news story paired with a liturgical reading from the daily Mass. The purpose is not mere reportage, nor casual commentary, but a deliberate exercise in seeing the "signs of the times" through a biblical lens.

The ***Signs of the Times of the Rice Granary*** invites us to pause, reflect, and interrogate the moral, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of contemporary events. From tales of public corruption in Nueva Ecija to stories of human resilience, each reflection illuminates the tension between the brokenness of society and the call to faithful stewardship, justice, and integrity. Here, journalism meets vocation: current events are interpreted with theological insight, philosophical inquiry, and ethical concern.

I hope that these reflections will inspire readers to engage with their own communities critically and spiritually, cultivating discernment, accountability, and courage in the pursuit of truth and the common good.

1

Ghost Projects and Broken Stewardship

Lupao's ₱190M 'ghost projects' reveal more than missing roads and schools, they expose a crisis of stewardship and trust. As the Gospel reminds us, true leadership bears fruit, not false documents

The recent discovery of nearly **₱190 million in "ghost projects"** in Lupao, Nueva Ecija, with forged signatures, fake municipal documents, and falsely reported "completed" public works, feels troubling both locally and morally. What stands out is how bold the deception was. Officials claimed a flood control system, a farm-to-market road, and a school building were finished, but when local leaders and reporters checked, none of these structures existed.

This goes beyond simple bureaucratic mistakes; it is a moral insult to the community and harms the common good. As I read this news and reflect on the **Gospel of Luke 19:11–28**, I am left with a difficult but important question: *What does true stewardship mean in a society where dishonesty and corruption are so common?*

In the Gospel, Jesus shares a parable about a king who gives his servants gold coins and later asks them to explain how they used them. This story shows three kinds of stewards: those who are hardworking and faithful, those who are afraid and careless, and those who are openly defiant. Looking at the Lupao scandal in this way, it is more than just a case of fake documents. It is a spiritual crisis caused by failed stewardship. The people who forged signatures and made-up projects are like the "wicked servant" who not only ignores his duty but also breaks the trust given to him. The government is meant to be a steward of public funds, trusted by God and the people to help everyone thrive. When that trust is broken, the wrongdoing is not just about rules. It affects relationships, morals, and the whole community.

Yet the Gospel does not only condemn; it also illuminates. Jesus' parable insists that all entrusted things, talents, authority, and resources must bear fruit. The LGU of Lupao, particularly Mayor Glenda Romano and the municipal staff who clarified the authenticity of the documents, represents the alternative model of stewardship. Instead of hiding behind silence or complicity, they initiated an investigation, declared the documents "spurious," and cooperated with the DPWH's inquiry. This is the kind of proactive stewardship the Gospel commends: the courage to bring truth into the open, even when it exposes uncomfortable realities. In an age where corruption often thrives in the shadows, truth-telling becomes a prophetic action.

The story shows us the "**signs of the times**" that the Gospel asks us to face. In our society, development projects like roads, classrooms, and flood control systems are vital for safety, education, and dignity. When these projects are faked, the poor suffer twice: first, they lose what was promised, and second, money is taken from their future. The Gospel teaches that stewardship is measured by accountability, not power. Jesus' warning, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant," stands as a challenge to any system or person who abuses public trust. Still, the Gospel gives hope: God continues to inspire faithful stewards who choose transparency, service, and justice instead of self-interest.

So, what should a Christian communicator do? First, speak **the truth**. Communication is not neutral; it comes with moral responsibility. We are meant to expose injustice, give voice to the marginalized, and stand against corruption. Second, we need to listen carefully to the experiences of everyday people whose lives are touched by these scandals. Finally, we should show ethical leadership in our own roles by being transparent in small things, staying true to our values, and bravely asking for accountability.

The Lupao "ghost projects" push us to change our own hearts in addition to denouncing corruption. The gospel urges us to take good care of our communities' dignity, resources, and the truth. We run the risk of becoming like the disloyal servant whose carelessness and deceit finally condemn him if we neglect to protect what has been entrusted to us. It is hoped that by facing such tales, we will grow more watchful, sympathetic, and dedicated to creating a society in which justice is not a pipe dream and truth is not fabricated.

Reference: https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BrdfCTWJ6/

2

Threads of Hope

From fast-food counters to hospital wards: 500 crochet hats crafted with care by Cabanatuan City

employees become quiet symbols of hope, patience, and redemption in the midst of life's trials.

This past week, I read a local news story from Cabanatuan City that stood out to me. Fast-food employees, managers, and accountants from the AST Franchise Group in Sumacab Sur made **over 500 crochet hats** for cancer patients and dialysis warriors through their project "aMAYzing Yarn for Hope." What started as a simple idea inspired by Ms. May Layug and supported by the compassion of employees from fourteen stores became a real show of support for those who are sick. The stores provided the yarn, hooks, and other materials, while the workers gave their time, effort, and creativity. At first, it might seem like just another uplifting story. But when I thought about it alongside this week's Gospel reading, it took on a much deeper meaning.

The **Gospel of Luke 21:20–28** describes a world in distress: nations are troubled, people are afraid, and even creation seems to suffer. Jesus talks about these hard times but finishes with a powerful message: *"When these things begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads, because your redemption is at hand."* This passage is called apocalyptic, not just because it talks about destruction, but because it shows us something deeper. Life is fragile and suffering is part of it, but God's closeness is the most important truth.

When I read about fast-food employees crocheting hats, I saw it as a quiet protest against the spiritual darkness Christ spoke of, as well as a civic endeavor. Dialysis facilities and cancer wards are "apocalyptic spaces" in and of themselves, places where fear, uncertainty, and mortality are ever-present. Luke's visions of weaker bodies, weary spirits, and an uncertain future come to life in those rooms. However, 500 carefully crafted crochet hats emerge into that gloom as tiny, tangible symbols of salvation.

The Gospel urges its audience to stay strong and optimistic rather than give in to fear. These workers, many of whom lead typical, hectic, and possibly challenging lives, exemplify this call. Rather than waiting for powerful organizations or the government to take action, they started a comfort movement on their own. Theologically speaking, it is similar to the Incarnation itself: God uses the commonplace to reveal the extraordinary; hope is expressed

through modest acts of kindness rather than spectacle. Their slow, deliberate, and nearly contemplative crocheting turns into a spiritual activity. Crochet requires patience, presence, and tenderness in a world where productivity and speed are the norm. In a way, it's countercultural.

The Gospel also warns us not to be indifferent. Jesus points out not just the violence in the world, but also the danger of ignoring what is happening around us. Seen this way, the project gently challenges a society that is often distracted by consumerism. The fast-food industry, known for speed, profit, and efficiency, becomes the place for a project based on compassion and human connection. It reminds us that even business settings can become places of solidarity if people decide to care and take action.

For a Christian communicator, the message is clear: we should share these acts of hope not just as feel-good stories, but as real signs of God's presence in a broken world. We are called to highlight the quiet voices, the small acts, and the humble beginnings that Christ often valued. We should ask ourselves: Where else is redemption quietly happening? Who else is bringing hope in the middle of fear?

The crochet hats are more than just yarn; they are what the Gospel calls us to embody, signs of a redemption that is already breaking into our world, one act of compassion at a time.

Reference: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1GwTTvihL1/

3

Epiphany and the Politics of Unity

Leaders of Nueva Ecija gather for Dayalogo para sa Pagkakaisa, echoing the Epiphany's call: true authority listens, serves, and returns 'by another way.' Peace and justice begin not in power, but in humility and conversion.

The local news report on the recent *Dayalogo para sa Pagkakaisa* in Nueva Ecija, which brought together Bishop Jun Andaya, Governor Aurelio "Oyie" Umali, former Governor Cherry Umali, Vice Governor Lemon Umali, and representatives from civil and faith-based groups, shows leaders meeting to talk about peace, justice, and reconciliation. On the surface, it looks reassuring. But when we view this event through Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospel of the Epiphany of the Lord (Matthew 2:1–12), it becomes more than just a courtesy call or a symbolic lunch. It stands out as a real "sign of the times," calling for both affirmation and careful reflection from a Christian perspective.

In the Epiphany narrative, the Magi represent political, intellectual, and cultural authority from outside Israel. They possess power, learning, and influence, yet they are unsettled, searching, and willing to journey. Significantly, they do not encounter the Messiah in the halls of power, but rather in humility, as a child with Mary, his mother. Matthew contrasts two types of leadership: Herod's anxious, self-preserving rule that fears dialogue and truth, and the Magi's openness to be led by a star beyond their own systems of control. This Gospel becomes a hermeneutical key for interpreting the Nueva Ecija dialogue. The presence of both Church leaders and government officials suggests a willingness to "set out on a journey" together, but the Gospel presses the deeper question: *What kind of leadership is truly being manifested?*

The news highlights servant leadership, open communication, and unity for the common good. These are not just political terms; they connect deeply with the Gospel's message. In Matthew 2, actual authority is shown not by control, but by respect, listening, and change. The Magi kneel, give gifts, and most importantly, they go home by a different route: "they returned to their country by another way." Dialogue that does not lead to real change, reform, or a new way of leading can become just for show. The Epiphany calls leaders in Nueva Ecija not only to talk about peace and justice, but to live out a new way of governing that is transparent, cares for people experiencing poverty, and is accountable.

At the same time, the Church's role in this dialogue needs careful thought. Like the star, the Church does not replace Christ or become the goal; she points beyond herself. When bishops and priests meet with political leaders, the Gospel reminds us not to get too comfortable with

power. The Church's job is both to support what is good and to challenge what goes against God's Kingdom. For Christians, peace (*kapayapaan*) is not just the absence of conflict, but the result of justice and truth. So, while the dialogue in the news is hopeful, it also calls the Church to stay alert: to make sure unity does not silence the voices of the marginalized or support unfair systems.

This event also shows something more profound about our local situation. In a province shaped by political families, social inequality, and old wounds, the desire for reconciliation is genuine. The Epiphany reminds us that God enters these complex histories, not by avoiding them, but by shining light on them. The star shines over both Jerusalem and Bethlehem, over both power and poverty. The challenge is to discern: where is the Child truly found in Nueva Ecija today? In whose lives is Christ vulnerable, unseen, or ignored?

For a Christian communicator, this reflection leads to a clear call to action. The task is not to romanticize dialogue nor to cynically dismiss it, but to interpret it truthfully in the light of the Gospel. Christian communication must foster critical hope: hope that expects conversion, and critique that remains rooted in charity. Like the Magi, communicators are called to read the signs of the times attentively, to ask difficult questions, and to invite leaders and communities to choose "another way" after encountering Christ.

Dayalogo para sa Pagkakaisa can be read as an epiphanic moment: a partial manifestation of what could be. Whether it becomes a genuine revelation of God's reign or merely a fleeting star depends on whether those who have seen the light are willing, like the Magi, to be changed by it.

Reference: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1BWT6oNxB6/

4

The Epal Gospel

kulê archives
Province of Faces
"Nueva Ecija deserves leaders who serve without the need to be seen, those who build without signatures, and those who govern without applause."
THIS IS WHERE YOUR TAXES GO
EDITORIAL
Originally published in the CLSU Collegian Tabloid, Volume LXVII, Issue No. 1.
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Between asphalt and altar: In Nueva Ecija, public works bear the marks of power, not the face of

Christ. Luke 4 calls us to discern liberation over logos, service over spectacle

"*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... He has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor... to proclaim liberty to captives... and to let the oppressed go free.*"

Along the highways of Nueva Ecija, concrete speaks before conscience. Bridges, classrooms, waiting sheds, and flood control walls have become catechisms of a distorted gospel, one where the "good news" is not liberty for the poor, but visibility for the powerful. Reading the recent CLSU Collegian editorial on the "***epal plague***" alongside Luke 4:14–21 is jarring, almost scandalous, because the contrast is not subtle: where Christ proclaims liberation without a signature, our local officials stamp their names everywhere as if service requires authorship.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus enters the synagogue in Nazareth not to advertise Himself but to announce a mission that is radically other-centered. His authority is grounded not in self-promotion but in divine commissioning: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*." There are no banners, no logos, no initials etched into stone, only a declaration that God's favor is for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. The movement is centrifugal: from Christ to the margins. In Nueva Ecija, however, the movement is centripetal: everything revolves around political personalities. Public works are not testimonies to the common good but shrines to individual power. The faces that line our roads become anti-icons, images that obscure rather than reveal the face of Christ in the suffering poor.

The Gospel thus functions as a hermeneutical scalpel, cutting through the rhetoric of "transparency" that defenders of *epal politics* invoke. Jesus reads from Isaiah and then says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Fulfillment is measured by transformed lives, not by branded infrastructure. By contrast, in Nueva Ecija, fulfillment is measured by how many tarpaulins bear a surname, how many buildings carry a letter, "S" or "K", as if the alphabet itself must bow before political dynasties. Where Christ embodies humble service, local patronage culture aestheticizes power.

The news story exposes a deeper theological pathology: the conflation of gift with giver. When rice is repackaged as "*Umali Rice*," the sacramental logic of charity is inverted. In Christian theology, grace is always gratuitous; it points beyond the mediator to God. In *epal politics*, aid points back to the patron, cultivating *utang na loob* rather than solidarity. Luke's Gospel warns us against precisely this distortion. Christ does not heal to bind people in debt; He heals to set them free. Relief goods that carry a politician's face become instruments of subtle captivity, soft chains wrapped in plastic.

Moreover, Luke 4 situates Jesus' mission within a prophetic tradition that confronts unjust systems, not merely bad manners. The CLSU editorial rightly frames *epal politics* as more than aesthetic annoyance; it is a governance crisis that diverts resources from farmers who sell palay for a humiliating ₱10 per kilo while millions in public funds sit unused or are poured into "visibility projects." Here, the Gospel sharpens our moral vision: if the Spirit-anointed mission is to proclaim good news to the poor, then a system that beautifies the powerful while impoverishing farmers stands under judgment. Hunger in the "Rice Granary of the Philippines" is not fate; it is a theological scandal.

Luke's text also illuminates the psychology of normalization. In Nazareth, familiarity with Jesus nearly blinds the townspeople to His prophetic claim. *"Is this not Joseph's son?"* they ask. Similarly, in Nueva Ecija, the ubiquity of political signage dulls moral outrage. What was once intolerable becomes ordinary; what is ordinary becomes acceptable. The danger of this habituation is precisely what the Gospel warns against: when hearts grow accustomed to injustice, they become incapable of recognizing liberation when it arrives.

Yet Luke 4 is not only a critique; it is also a promise. Christ's proclamation begins with hope: liberation is possible, and it begins with truthful speech. The DILG's Memorandum 2026-006, ordering the removal of officials' names and images from government-funded projects, can be read, imperfectly but genuinely, as a faint echo of this Gospel logic: a small step toward restoring public space to the public, stripping away the theater of power so that service, not spectacle, might be seen.

For a Christian communicator, the call to action is therefore twofold: prophetic and pedagogical. Prophetic, because we must name *epal politics* for what it is: a form of structural

vanity that corrodes trust and contradicts the Gospel's preferential option for the poor. We cannot sanitize this language; to do so would betray Luke's own uncompromising tone. Pedagogical, because citizens must be formed to read public life sacramentally, to discern where grace is mediated and where it is manipulated.

Concretely, this means cultivating a civic spirituality that asks: *Does this project free or bind? Does it reveal Christ or conceal Him behind a smiling portrait? Does it serve farmers, or merely photograph them?* Christian communication, in this light, becomes a ministry of truth-telling, exposing false gospels of patronage while narrating alternative stories of quiet, signature-less service.

Luke 4 forces us to ask a piercing question of Nueva Ecija's landscape: **Whose face is being proclaimed?** If every bridge, classroom, and sack of rice preaches a politician's image, then Christ's liberating Word is crowded out by a thousand billboards. But if we dare to imagine a province where public works bear no names, only the common good, then perhaps we begin to glimpse what Jesus meant when He said, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled.*"

Until then, we stand between asphalt and altar, between propaganda and prophecy, challenged to rebuild not just roads, but trust; not just canals, but consciences; not just infrastructure, but a politics converted to the Gospel of humble service.

Reference: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/185um3UG3L/

5

Where Mushrooms and Miracles Meet

From tired hands to tender hope: Aling Teresita's mushroom harvest in Licab is more than livelihood, it's a testament that grace, like mushrooms, flourishes in unexpected places

In a small corner of Barangay Villarosa, hope sprouted quietly, not in the halls of power, not in a grand infrastructure project, but in something as humble and fragile as a mushroom. The recent story of Aling Teresita Dumlao, a 66-year-old senior citizen from Licab, who became a beneficiary of the "**Kabutehan Para sa Novo Ecijano**" program of the Provincial Government of Nueva Ecija, is not merely a feature on livelihood assistance. It is, when read

through the lens of Scripture, a theological text written in the soil of everyday life.

I am drawn particularly to the Gospel for Sunday, February 8, taken from Gospel of Luke 5:1-11, the call of Simon Peter and the miraculous catch of fish. In that passage, Peter, exhausted from a night of fruitless labor, hears Christ command: *"Put out into the deep water and lower your nets for a catch."* Despite his fatigue and doubt, he obeys. The result is abundance, nets nearly breaking, boats almost sinking. But more than fish, Peter receives a vocation: *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."*

At first glance, a miraculous catch of fish and a mushroom livelihood program in rural Nueva Ecija seem worlds apart. Yet both narratives share a common grammar: discouragement transformed into dignity through trust, obedience, and communal effort.

Aling Teresita once tilled the fields. Age, however, has imposed its quiet violence. Her knees ache; her strength wanes. In an agricultural province like Nueva Ecija, often called the Rice Granary of the Philippines, productivity is almost synonymous with worth. When one can no longer *"lusong"* into the fields, one risks not only economic marginalization but existential invisibility. Here lies a subtle but real social sin: we measure human value by output.

The Gospel unsettles this calculus. Peter's worth is not anchored in his failed catch nor in his professional competence as a fisherman. Christ enters precisely into his inadequacy. "Put out into the deep." The command is not logical; it is relational. It asks trust.

"Kabutehan Para sa Novo Ecijano" program does more than distribute mushroom-growing kits. It restores agency. It whispers to a 66-year-old woman: You are not done. You are not obsolete. There is still depth into which you can cast your nets, perhaps not into vast waters, but into small sacks of growing medium where mushrooms slowly emerge in quiet defiance of despair.

Mushrooms are almost sacramental in this context. They grow in darkness and humidity. They flourish where decay once was. **Is this not a parable of grace?** God's economy does not waste weakness; He transfigures it. What the world deems as limitation becomes fertile ground for providence.

The story reveals a synodal dimension. The joy in Aling Teresita's home is not solitary. Her grandchildren help in harvesting. The household becomes a small *ecclesia,* a domestic church cooperating in daily bread. In Luke's Gospel, the miraculous catch required more than one boat; partners were summoned. Grace overflows beyond individual boundaries. Authentic Christian social action must therefore resist paternalism. It must empower communities, not merely rescue individuals.

Livelihood programs, while noble, can become token gestures if not sustained structurally. The Gospel challenges both beneficiaries and benefactors. Peter leaves everything to follow Christ. The encounter demands conversion. Likewise, local governance must move beyond episodic assistance toward systemic justice: accessible healthcare for seniors, inclusive economic models, and policies that honor the elderly not as burdens but as living archives of wisdom.

From a moral and philosophical standpoint, Aling Teresita's renewed joy confronts our culture's obsession with youth and speed. Mushrooms grow patiently; they cannot be rushed. Perhaps aging, too, is a vocation, a slower, contemplative participation in life. The program did not return her to the rice fields; it adapted work to her condition. This is subsidiarity in action: meeting the person where she is.

As a Christian communicator, I cannot remain neutral. Stories like this are "**signs of the times**." They reveal both the fragility of our social structures and the resilience of grace. The call is twofold: first, to amplify narratives of hope without romanticizing poverty; second, to advocate for a culture where economic initiatives are rooted in the inherent dignity of the human person.

"***Put out into the deep***." For Aling Teresita, the deep was not a lake but a livelihood kit. For the provincial government, the deep is the courage to prioritize the marginalized. For us who read this story, the deep may be the uncomfortable space where faith demands concrete solidarity.

What nearly broke in Luke's Gospel were the nets, because they could not contain the abundance given. May our communities in Licab and beyond experience the same holy

excess: a harvest not only of mushrooms, but of restored dignity, intergenerational joy, and a renewed conviction that no one, no matter their age, is beyond God's horizon of purpose.

Reference: https://youtu.be/s-lPUMGbE24?si=zxD5pV68BmgIb_Ra

Dedication

All for the Gospel!